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## Elgin plea chips at image of Greek PM

From John Carr  
in Athens  
and David Charter  
in Brussels

COSTAS SIMITIS, the Greek Prime Minister, is under fire after being caught pleading with Tony Blair for the return of the Elgin Marbles to boost his chances of re-election.

In an aside caught by a European Broadcasting camera during a lull in the informal EU summit in Brussels on Thursday, Mr Simitis turned to Mr Blair, saying: "You know, we've got an election coming." Moments later: "I think you'd better start thinking about the Marbles: it could prove useful for the election."

The apparent blatancy of the request came in for ridicule yesterday by Greece's media, even from newspapers that support Mr Simitis.

As shown on Greek television, after an initial exchange of pleasantries Mr Simitis made the request with what was described as a little laugh. Mr Blair, grinning, placed his hand on Mr Simitis's shoulder and replied: "So you want me to tell you some good news?"

Mr Simitis replied: "I want your personal opinion because there's publicity surrounding the issue. I want to know if we can do something. You know, we have elections coming up next year and maybe this could prove useful."

Mr Blair avoided giving Mr Simitis any assurances and Downing Street later said that the future of the sculptures was a matter for their owners, the British Museum trustees. A spokeswoman for the museum, which has held the sculptures from the Parthenon since 1811, yesterday gave Mr Simitis no grounds for optimism. "The British Museum is the best possible place for the sculptures," she said.

Mr Simitis's four-year term ends in the spring. His Panhellenic Socialist Movement has been trailing the conservative New Democracy opposition in the polls by at least 7 points for almost two years.

Mr Simitis admitted the request but said that his motives were noble. "It's in our interest to bring up the matter as soon as possible, otherwise it's not going to be solved before the Olympic Games [in Athens next August]," he said.

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